

# A Practical guide to Fostering Critical Thinking in First Grade Through Graduate School Using Children's Literature, in Particular Picture Books

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**T**he proliferation of articles, curricular materials, conferences dealing with the nature and development of critical thinking and the coining of the word «edutainment» may be taken as an indication of the serious and extensive concern educators and others have in fostering critical thinking among today's students and by implication, tomorrow's adults. The following is a way of utilizing children's literature, in particular picture books, to foster critical thinking. It differs from approaches which equate a part of critical thinking, analytic thinking, with the whole of critical thinking as well as from those which separate critical thinking from the environment out of which and in terms of which it arises and develops. It is similar to those approaches which consider critical thinking to be an awareness of and facility in employing the many processes people use in daily living to perceive, imagine, intellectualize, decide and evaluate; i.e., to think and to think about their thinking. It is also similar to those approaches which regard critical thinking as an environmental emergent; i.e., as conditioned by the interacting of physical, emotional, interpersonal and institutional forces which affect how people think and think about their thinking. It is supposed that thinking and critical thinking result from processes of active, mutual and interdependent engagements centering around specific issues within specified environments. It involves responding to oral and visual material, the picture book, and responding to the original response through group discussion and other activities.<sup>1</sup> It begins with shared personal experience, proceeds to open ended yet directed discussion, culminates in universal or philosophic considerations and returns to the level of the, hopefully, enriched personally experienced.<sup>2</sup> To facilitate this kind of multifaceted and some times confusing engagement, the following practical fourfold procedure of selecting, preparing, discussing and following up is offered as well as a brief traditional critical thinking discussion orientation.

## PRACTICAL GUIDE

### *Selecting*

Since critical thinking is here considered to be a multi-processed environmental emergent, each child and adult brings with them a unique and complex orientation in terms of which they will engage

what you present. Hence, select a work that is appropriate to the children's and/or adults' experience, suggests a focus i.e. idea, issue or theme, and lends itself to multiple interpretations<sup>3</sup> so that the children/adults can become aware of and gradually gain a facility in:

1. utilizing their own processes in dealing with the story, responding;
2. dealing with their own dealing with the story; i.e. thinking about their thinking about the story, responding to their responses.

Thus a picture book, like Pat Hutchin's *Changes, Changes* or William Steig's *Doctor DeSoto*, or Jay William's *Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like* may be better than an Aesop fable or Phillip and Hannah Hoose's *Hey Little Ant* where in a single issue or «moral» may not only be implied but in some cases explicitly given<sup>4</sup> and/or developed. This does not mean that a particularly focused book is never appropriate. It depends upon the people you are working with and what you want to accomplish.

### **Preparing**

Once you have selected a work, e.g., *Doctor DeSoto* (which has been used in first grade through medical school and deals with a mouse dentist treating a fox), formulate groups of questions whose answers will enable the children/ adults to:

1. draw on their experiences to relate to the theme/themes;
2. open the story to many interpretations;
3. move to a more general or philosophical level;
4. transfer what they have learned and the capacities they have developed/used in learning it to other area of their lives.

To help the children/adults draw upon their experiences to help in preparing for the discussion, you could ask questions about:

1. The title of the story;
2. The art work, perhaps on the cover;
3. An issue similar to that which will be dealt with in the story.

The important thing is to suggest the beginning of an orientation without being too detailed and hence limiting the specifics the children/adults will supply from their engagement with the story. For example, in using *Doctor DeSoto*, and depending upon the age of the group, you could show the book and ask questions based on the title. What do you think *Doctor DeSoto* is about? Do you think his being the kind of animal he is might be important in the story? Etc. The answers to these questions are rather specific. They emerge from a remembrance of what happened in the children's lives. «This happened.» And in their specificity, they are different from the kinds of questions that will open the story to many interpretations.

To help the children/adults engage the story after it has been read, formulate questions that do not primarily focus on specific incidents in the story such as character, plot, setting, etc. unless you think the children have not fully understood these elements. In which case, these kinds of questions are certainly appropriate. Once, however, you are confident they have understood the story, use questions

that will enable the children/adults to move from the specific issues of the story's «this» to a more general/universal consideration of «this kind of issue. For example, you could ask, «What do you think the story is about?» rather than, «What happened between the DeSotos and the fox?» Or, «Why do people visit doctors?» rather than, «Why did the fox visit the DeSotos?» Or, «Should you ever make an exception to a personally held belief?» rather than, «What did the sign outside the DeSoto's office say?» followed by, «Did the DeSotos abide by it?» Or, «Is it ever right to kill someone?» rather than, «Was it 'shabby' for the fox to make up his mind to eat the DeSotos?» These questions allow the children/adults to move beyond the specific «this» to «this kind of issue and obviously the ease with which you achieve this depends upon the age and development of the group involved.

To enable the children/adults to advance to an even more general, universal or philosophical level than «this kind of», formulate questions that deal with «any kind of issue. For example, if one of the issues you focus on is making moral judgments, you could ask, «How do people decide what is morally right or wrong?» rather than, «How do doctors and patients decide what is morally right or wrong in dealing with one another? ('this kind of).» Or, «Was what the fox tried to do to the DeSotos or what the DeSotos did to the fox morally right or wrong?» («this»). In formulating the more universal «any kind of» questions, it is helpful but not necessary to have some understanding of how this type of issue has been dealt with by others working on this level who, in general, are considered philosophers.<sup>5</sup> For example, in dealing with morality, you could ask yourself the following: What is the situation or problem being deal with? Is it and, if it is, what makes it, a moral situation? What precisely is being evaluated? Is it values, motive, rules or laws, people, actions, consequences, etc.? Who is doing the evaluating? Why? How is the evaluating being done? And, finally, how, if at all, is the evaluation justified? You don't have to, and may not be able to, use these questions since you should work with whatever responses you get from the children/adult. However, it is helpful for you to be aware of orientations and issues on this level so that, if you can, you may be able to guide the children/adults in their thinking towards that which is more comprehensive and complete. The progress from «this» to «this kind of and possibly to «any kind of may be slow and difficult although sometimes enjoyable and eventually delightful.

Once you have the children's/adults' responses to questions of «this kind of or «any kind of you can return to the story and see how they can apply what they have learned to what they originally said. For example, if you have reached the level of «any kind of and using the previous questions, you could come up with the following in relation to the DeSoto story:

1. What is the situation(s) or problem(s) being dealt with?
  - a. *asking for help*
  - b. *accepting a potentially dangerous patient*
  - c. *deciding to kill someone*
  - d. *deceiving or not telling the whole truth*
2. What is being evaluated?
  - a. *the motives of the characters*
  - b. *the character of the doctor and/or patient*
  - c. *the response of the patient*
  - d. *the helping of the patient*
  - e. *the 'deception' of the patient*
  - f. *the results of asking for help, giving help, the 'deception'*
  - g. *the appropriateness of professional standards; i.e. the sign outside the DeSoto's office*

*h. the appropriateness of personal beliefs; i. e. DeSoto'' belief that once he starts a job he finishes it  
i. the removal of pain j. personal protection k. the well-being of all*

3. Who is doing the evaluation?

*a. the fox*

*b. the doctor*

*c. we, the readers*

4. *How, if at all, is the evaluation justified?*

The important thing is not to impose any particular philosophical orientation or theory on the children/adults, but to enable them to see how what they have derived from their progressive consideration of the issue(s) in the story can be applied to the story to further illuminate and enhance their understanding of it and the issues they have raised about it. How this may be done critically will be considered in the next section, discussion.

### ***Follow Up***

Finally, to encourage the children/adults to transfer what they have learned and to further utilize the capacities they have developed in learning it to other areas of their lives, formulate questions or develop projects that they can do by themselves or together, in or out of school. For example, the children could interview health professionals to find out what problems they face, how they deal with them and what, if any, justification they can give for what they say they have done. Or, they could formulate the questions they asked earlier in considering the story, and then dramatize the situation for other children using their questions to engage in a group discussion with the other children. The adults could consider issues relevant to their own lives, interview, research and discuss their findings, etc.

### CRITICAL THINKING DISCUSSION

Since critical thinking is here taken to be an environmental emergent resulting from active, mutual and interdependent engagements which lead to the awareness and employment of thinking and thinking about thinking, the three levels of questions you have formulated provide half of what you need to engender a critical thinking discussion by enabling children to think about something they have shared and discussed, the story. Since critical thinking also involves not only thinking about something but thinking about our thinking about something, the children/adults need to be encouraged to reflect upon, analyze and evaluate their own thinking. Previously, you enabled them to draw upon their own experience and move towards higher or more general levels of thinking about something, the story. Now you can enable them to do the same with their thinking about their thinking about the story. You can formulate questions about the questions you have already formulated as well as about the responses that the children/adults may make in answering them.<sup>6</sup> Thus, regardless of the response given to a particular question on any level, you can, in general, ask critically reflective questions such as:

1. What do you mean by ... ?

2. Does what you say presuppose anything?

3. Are there implications to what you have said?

4. Why?

5. Do you have reasons for what you said? 6. Do you know that? How?

7. Do you agree or disagree with ... Why?

## 8. Are there other ways of looking at ... ?

In responding to these kinds of critically reflective questions, the children/adults will be thinking about their thinking and developing their capacities to do this by doing it. Hence, you may or may not want to use these questions in preparing the children/adults for the reading, but you may use them in your discussion and possibly in their follow up activities. For example, for any response to, «Was it `shabby' for the fox to make up his mind to eat the DeSotos?» (this) you could ask, «Why do you say that?» And you can ask others, «Do you agree with what was said?» «Why or why not?» In response to responses to, «How do doctors and patients decide what is morally right or wrong in dealing with one another?» (this kind of), you could use the above questions as well as, «What do you mean by morally right?» and/or «How do you know that?» And finally, in dealing with responses to, «How do people decide what is morally right?» (any kind of) you could ask the previous critically reflective questions as well as, «Does what you say presuppose anything?» and «Are there implications to what you have said?» Not only could your utilization of these critically reflective types of questions encourage active reflective engagement, it could also enable the children/adults to see how they could employ them with one another to critically discuss whatever they want to among themselves without the necessity of a facilitator. Hence, discussion would take place primarily among the children/ adults rather than either orchestrated by you or between you and some of them. Obviously, this requires a certain level of maturation and training on both the facilitator's and children's/adults' parts, but the capacities developed through asking and responding to higher level and critically reflective thinking questions can facilitate this.

## CONCLUSION

The previous suggestions are an attempt to show how traditional analytical thinking skills can be utilized in a mutually contributory, developmental and supportive environment which does not undermine or eliminate the role of a facilitator but utilizes the skill of the facilitator to enable the children/adults to develop and/or recognize the capacities and skills used by you, the facilitator, to guide the discussion. As a help in doing this, you can prepare a discussion plan which you may or may not use depending upon the response of the children/adults. It may be outlined as follows:

### I. Pre-Story Questions

- A. Select a focus or theme/s suggested in the story that is/are appropriate to the children's/ adults' experience.
- B. List some questions that draw from their experience and relate to the focus or theme/s.

### II. Post-Story Questions

- A. List some questions that would open the story to several interpretations.
- B. List some questions that would lead to more general or philosophical consideration of the focus or theme/s chosen for the discussion.

### III. Transference

- A. List some questions that could stimulate further discussion by transferring what was learned in the discussions to something else in the children's/adults' life.
- B. Suggest or indicate a project that will involve using what has been learned in the discussion to create something else in the group, school or community.

A sample discussion plan using both kinds of questions and analytic thinking in leading a discussion about /on Doctor DeSoto could look like the following:

## DOCTOR DE SOTO

By William Steig

### I. Pre-Story Questions

- A. What concerns do you have when you visit a doctor?
  - 1. Why do you have those concerns?
  - 2. What do you want the doctor to do? Why?
- B. What concerns do you think the doctor might have when s/he sees you?
  - 1. Why do you think s/he might have those concerns?
  - 2. What do you think the doctor may want to happen as a result of your visit? Why?
- C. WOULD YOU WANT TO BE A DOCTOR?
  - 1. Why?

### II. Post-Story Questions

- A. what happened in the story?
  - 1. Was it morally right for the DeSotos to treat the fox? Why?
  - 2. Was it morally right for the fox to decide to eat the DeSotos? Why?
  - 3. Was it morally right for the DeSotos not to tell the fox all about the treatment they would give him? Why?
- B. Is it ever morally right for doctors:
  - 1. To treat dangerous patients? Why?
  - 2. Not to tell patients everything about the possible results of the treatment they may receive? Why?
- C. Is it ever morally right for anyone:
  - 1. To do anything that is dangerous? Why?
  - 2. Not to tell everything they know about something to anybody? Why?
- D. What does «morally right» mean?
- E. How can anyone decide whether something is morally right or wrong?
- F. what can be morally right or wrong? Why?

### III. Post -Discussion Questions

A. What do you need to know to answer the question, «what makes something morally right or wrong?» why?

#### IV. Transfer Questions

A. Pick something you think is morally right and tell:

1. Why you think it is so.
2. How you come to know why you think it is so.

B. Pick something you think is morally wrong and tell:

1. Why you think it is so.
2. How you come to know why you think it is so.

C. Pick something you think is neither morally right or wrong and tell:

1. Why you think it is so.
2. How you come to know why you think it is so.

D. Are there differences between something being morally right and morally wrong?

1. If so, what are they?
2. If not, why aren't there any?

E. Which do you think it is easier to decide: 1. Why something is morally right, or 2. Why something is morally wrong?

- a. Why do you think so?

Notice that the above questions are fluid and move, depending on circumstances, between and among the three levels and the critically reflective questions. Also notice that the pre-story questions and the first half of the post-story questions are geared to children and focus on the theme of morality. For an older group, they might deal with sex role stereotyping, male doctor/ female nurse, litigation, inadequate treatment information or any other issue developed by the group which is relevant to the story; also, the second half of the post-story questions and especially the transference questions focuses on the development of «any kind of» questions and traditional analytic thinking skills, especially «why» and «how».

The reception as well as the depth and breath of discussion/development facilitated by the use of children's literature (and not just with children) was truly amazing to me since my training did not regularly involve using it. I hope it will be the same for you. And I would be happy to hear about your experiences, the books<sup>7</sup> you have used and plans you have developed.

Good luck!

#### NOTES

1. For an excellent source of audiovisual media made from original picture books contact Weston Woods, 265 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06880 [orwstnwoods@aol.com](mailto:orwstnwoods@aol.com) for a free catalogue.

2. For a general and comprehensive orientation to this whole area see Lipman (1993) and Matthews (1994).

3. For orientation and examples see Matthews (1980), (1984).

4. For an introduction to children's literature see Braus and Gieded (2000), Hersch (1996) and Trochtenberg (2003).

5. For accessible and comprehensive introductions see Honer, Hunt and Okholm (2002), Kolak and Martin (1999) and Palmer (1996). For an engaging «first person account» see Fynn(1974).

6. For a more detailed and developed orientation see Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980) and Sharp and Splitter (1995).

7. There are many classic and contemporary children's literature/picture books to chose from. A beginning might involve Brigs (2002), Charlip and Moore (1996), Cooney (1990), Curtis (1996), Fleischman and Hawkes (1999), Goffen (1993), Kraus (1971), Lioni (1974) and Zolotow (1982).

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